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# RIVAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

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## V. EVANGELICISM OR MODERNIZED PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY

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The term "evangelicism" is here used to designate the character of a development of the Christian religion which is distinctly modern, but which has roots reaching far back into the past. It is not meant thereby that a new religious denomination has arisen or that even a new school of thought deserves a name for itself. We do not seem to be suffering particularly from a dearth of organizations or new theories. But recent times have witnessed the emergence of a new type of Christian life and thought which seems to be so charged with a message of good to the world that a term which carries with it the idea of loyalty to such a message may be fitly applied to it. The aim of the present article is to trace the influences formative of it and to indicate its main features.

### **I. Some Constructive Religious Forces in Modern Christianity**

The period of the ecclesiastico-political revolution we call the Protestant Reformation virtually came to a close with the execution of King Charles the First of England and the signing of the Peace of Westphalia about two hundred and seventy years ago. With the cessa-

tion of the "wars of religion" and the reaction against intolerance and violence, there ensued a period of indifference and general skepticism lasting about a century more. Notwithstanding the fact that there were fertile oases here and there amid the general dearth, religious faith suffered from widespread sterility. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, there came a change. The principal factors contributing to it are worthy of special mention.

First in the order of merit is the eighteenth-century religious revival in America and Britain. There were many faithful men who labored in quiet and obscurity to keep the smoldering fire of faith from going out in those trying days when men were shaking themselves clear of the external forms of ritual or order or doctrine which earlier ages had supposed to be necessary to salvation. To them must be traced the revival of the consciousness of an indisputable personal participation in the higher moral and religious life apart from outward forms, but it was not until men like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and John Wesley brought to it the needed zeal, intelligence, and skill united that it burst into a fiery flame. There came an outbreak of religious feeling

that defied the intellectual canons of rationalism and of orthodoxy alike and swept on through the whole Anglo-Saxon world with irresistible force. As all great revivals, it gained its first impetus by winning the hearts of the working-people, the poor, the neglected, and the defeated, but, despite scoffing and ridicule, it gradually conquered the respect of the prosperous and intelligent. Instead of wasting away in emotionalism, the revival, under the statesman-like leadership of Wesley and his faithful coadjutors in various communions, kept adding to its initial impulse and became a permanent force of great importance in modern Protestantism. Since those earlier days of revivalism there have been considerable intervals of dearth, and sometimes it has degenerated into selfish professionalism or hypocritical sentimentalism, but the yearning for the conversion of men from their sins and the effort to better their whole condition by the ministries of religion continue unabated.

The revival was characterized by the union of deep feeling with moral resolution. There was a return of Puritanism on its moral side. The danger of fanaticism was balanced by the insistence on inner and outer purity of life. For the "judicial righteousness" of earlier Calvinism was substituted the actual righteousness of positive personal goodness. If the preachers in their denunciation of sins condemned sometimes the innocent with the guilty, they succeeded at least in rousing the consciences of men to action and doomed to death the antinomianism that had been eating out the heart of orthodoxy. Personal purity was a demand for the

present life and was not to be postponed to the day of the soul's separation from the body. This is probably the import of John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection or perfect love in this life. The Christian salvation was to be a present reality, the conscious possession of an enlightened heart.

The spirit of philanthropy was quickened and broadened. The great public wrongs under which men were suffering began to call loudly for remedy. John Howard's crusade on behalf of the prisoners in the jails of Europe, efforts for the improvement of the criminal law in the direction of equity and humanity in penalties, the extinction of the slave trade, intervention on behalf of the "factory hands," the fight against the evils of strong drink, were all in part fruits of the revival. Notwithstanding the emphasis placed on the hope of heaven, men were evidently learning the worth of the earthly life as the sphere for the realization of the heavenly. A Protestant principle that had been half forgotten in the controversies and persecutions of earlier days was coming to vigorous renewal, namely, the unspeakable worth of the man.

The progress of the revival was sustained throughout by the conviction that religion has its home in the soul of the individual. Its value and its truth are self-attesting, for God speaks to man directly. This was but a renewal of the Protestant view expressed in the oft-quoted affirmation of Calvin that the truth of God's word was certified to men by "the secret testimony of the Spirit." Only it was universalized. Every man was competent to enjoy this immediate certainty. The center of gravity in

religion was shifted from objective facts, doctrines, or rites, to the inner life—faith. Experience is the ultimate fact in the life of religion. Men who had “the witness of the Spirit” that they were forgiven, renewed, saved, possessed a basis of certainty that made the Calvinist doctrines of election and predestination unnecessary for many people and even a stumbling-block to the free personal faith of others. For when the common man gains a “heart conviction” of the favor of God, he becomes independent of the artificial supports of fixed systems of any kind and resents their interference with his liberty.

The tide of feeling swept over ecclesiastical and doctrinal bounds. In the long run it mattered little that John Wesley, a faithful priest of the Church of England, strove to keep his “societies” within the order established by law. His followers swung loose and organized the various Methodist “churches.” It mattered little that he and Whitefield, with their followers, split on issues between Calvinists and Arminians. For both sides shared alike in the movement of grace, and after a time it became plain that the controversies between them were mostly side issues. All existing Protestant bodies shared the blessing, and new denominations of Christians were constantly arising as the movement spread. Many of these bodies have had a fairly fabulous growth. Hence, while the leaders and their followers professed conservative views, on the whole, in matters of theology, an era of ecclesiastical and theological freedom was being unconsciously ushered in and a stimulus given to reconstruction along all lines of life and thought.

Equally significant of the new freedom was the spontaneous outburst of Christian song. The Christian church has reason to be proud of its hymnody in almost all the periods of its history, despite much doggerel. There were noble Protestant hymnists in the days preceding the revival. But the ritual of the Church of England, being stereotyped, was a sedative rather than an inspiration of religious action, and the public services of nonconformists and Presbyterians both in America and in Britain were rather barren on the liturgical side. There was even controversy over the propriety of using “uninspired” productions in worship. Now all was changed. The new faith was sung into the hearts of the multitudes. The era of modern hymnody and religious music was ushered in. Charles Wesley alone composed over six thousand hymns. There were many other sweet singers in those days, though none so prolific as he. The bulk of these hymns have disappeared, but many remain as a permanent asset of the Christian faith. The religious fruitage remains even after the hymns perish. Revivals of religion are always marked now by the presence of the singing evangelist. The new faith is strongly emotional everywhere. The range of emotions has widened, while the expression is more restrained. The main point in this connection is that the emphasis has been shifted from the forms of order or of doctrines to the feelings, and the theology that would expound the new faith must take cognizance of the change.

The reawakening of the spirit of love for all men issued in the birth of the

modern Protestant foreign missionary movement. When the far vision of William Carey gave to the churches the inspiration for ambitions and undertakings undreamed of before, the pent-up energies of Protestant religion, hitherto confined to narrow bits of territory, comparatively speaking, and barely holding its own in the long struggle for existence, were released from their bonds and developed enterprises whose story reads like a fairy tale, so wonderful was their success. Christianity has truly become a world-religion. Its frontiers are now in every land. The work was urged at first as a means of universally rescuing men from guilt and condemnation, but it has now become an attempt to build the Christian faith into the social, industrial, and civil fabric of the life of the peoples. The variety and magnitude of the labors involved, the new acquaintance with the multitudinous faiths of mankind, the necessity of interpreting the Christian faith in the presence of these faiths, the inevitable co-operation of Christians who in the homeland belonged to rival churches, and the association of the missionary with the work of the statesman and the man of commerce have produced a reaction upon the quality of the religious life of the churches at home and have forced upon them the task of reinterpreting their faith to themselves. A new consciousness of the inherent universality of the Christian faith and a new sense of the reality of the inner communion of all Christians are among the beneficent results. The doctrinal outcome will be referred to later.

The increase of general intelligence in Protestant Christendom is equally

noteworthy. The astounding educational advance of modern times is directly traceable to religious impulses. The evangelist is followed by the teacher. The missionary becomes an educationist. The great systems of public schools, high schools, colleges, and universities, of which modern states are so justly proud, have mostly grown up from the voluntary schools founded by religious men and maintained by private funds in pursuance of the purpose to promote the spiritual good of the young. Although it may be true that in many cases the original founders of these schools were seeking particularly to guard the young believing mind from the assaults of a secularized intellect, nevertheless the evidence remains clear that to the modern Protestant the religious life cannot be truly fostered except by the increase of intelligence. Moreover, in addition to the schools of Christendom there is the tremendous educational influence of the press. The unlimited circulation of newspapers and periodicals of all kinds and the prodigious output of books, taken in conjunction with the free intermingling of millions of men by means of wide travel and the use of the telegraph and telephone, have produced a sense of the dignity and power of the human spirit and a consciousness of human solidarity scarcely dreamed of before. The religious life of such a people must be vastly different in its content and utterance from any earlier type. There is a modernized Protestant Christianity. The modern evangel has obtained a wider range of appeal and an increase of power to impress its convictions on men. It has appropriated the language of modern

culture and has gained a broader outlook. All the pursuits of intelligence are now reckoned within the pale of the religious life. Christians are conscious of a larger vocation. In order that this vocation may be fulfilled a reinterpretation of Christianity is demanded.

## **2. Some Secular Forces Contributing to the Formation of a New Type of Christianity**

It is not to be supposed for a moment that the religious life of our times takes its character wholly from those influences which are ordinarily acknowledged as religious. For the religious life of any people at any period of time is constituted by the whole complex of forces which, in their unity, go to make up the character of the people in question. Everything about them heads up in their religion. This is seen particularly in Protestant life. For Protestantism, by breaking away from the ideals of the cloister and sallying forth to the task of mastering and sanctifying the natural, exposed itself from the very first to the molding influence of industry and trade as well as to the currents of social and political life.

It is surely a significant thing that the intensification and expansion of the religious life of Protestantism in the last century and a half is fairly paralleled by a similar growth in the production and exchange of material wealth. The spirit of enterprise inherent in Protestantism, which had suffered a check through the internal strifes of Europe, reawoke at the very time when "the Spirit of the Lord began to move mightily" upon John Wesley and George

Whitefield. Beginning in the eighteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth, there was an economic awakening like that which occurred when mediaeval Europe was roused from her intellectual sloth, her moral coarseness, and her religious passivity. Only the new change was on a tremendous scale. Mechanical invention has produced a revolution in nearly all human industries. Production, manufacture, and transportation proceed on a scale impossible to imagine one hundred and fifty years ago. The factory and not the home is now the seat of industry. The town has been robbing the country of its peasantry. New vast centers of population have been created. Cities number their inhabitants by the hundreds of thousands and by the millions. New sources of wealth have been sought out and forces long concealed from human ken have been recruited for man's service. Lands far separated geographically have realized a close community of interest. Railroads have made them neighbors. Great ships of high speed in ever-growing numbers plow the seas. The production of wealth has become fabulous, and its exchange is now so complicated that only the few understand its processes. Geographical boundaries and national distinctions have been mostly overcome for the purposes of trade. Steam, steel, and electricity have belted far-separated communities together as one vast industrial body. The problems of adjustment which, in consequence, confront the economist, the statesman, and the moralist are simply appalling. Not less serious are the problems which confront the religious thinker, as we shall see.

Be it noted that the Protestant nations have been the leaders in these enterprises. Where Protestant religion enters, there too comes material prosperity and comfort. It is surely a far cry from the natural poverty of the primitive Christian and his longing for the Lord's return, as well as from the voluntary poverty of the mediaeval saint and his longing for heaven, to the acquisition of incalculable wealth by modern Protestant Christians and their devotion of it to the enterprises of religious faith. There seems to be a natural association between Protestant religion and Protestant industry. The concurrence of the two revivals in time and space implies their dependence upon a common impulse. Surely some new sense of freedom, of initiative, of creative power, had come to men and was manifesting its character in the parallel conquests of things material and things spiritual. That it was so in the spiritual realm we have already seen. It was the same in the realm of physical industry, we must conclude, if we rely on the enunciation of its controlling principle by Adam Smith in his famous *Wealth of Nations*. He says: "The patrimony of a poor man lies in the strength and dexterity of his hands, and to hinder him from employing this strength and dexterity in what manner he thinks proper, without injury to his neighbor, is a plain violation of this most sacred property. It is a manifest encroachment upon the just liberty of both the workman and of those who might be disposed to employ him." If we change the reference in these words from man's outer powers to his inner powers and the application from external acts to

inward acts, we detect the inner harmony between Protestant industrialism and Protestant religion. We shall see, however, that neither is an instance of pure individualism.

Far more significant than the mere creation and accumulation of wealth or the new distribution and grouping of population, with the accompanying social changes, is the manner (alluded to above) in which the activities and interests of all the peoples concerned have become interlocked. An economic disturbance in one quarter of the world is rapidly transmitted to almost every part of it. A feeling of economic interdependence pervades the world, overriding hostile tariffs and other artificial restrictions. Economic insularity is becoming a thing of the past. The industries of the world are more than competitive; they are complementary. There is an increasing sensitiveness with regard to business happenings everywhere. The time seems near when the many economic kingdoms of the world shall become one kingdom.

Changes in the political realm during the period under review have been equally startling, and their bearing on the religious life of men is important. It has been a time of political revolution, partly peaceful and partly violent. In this the Anglo-Saxon and French peoples have been the leaders. The democratic self-affirmation that broke out in the American Revolution and culminated in the founding of the republic of the United States was just the revival and reinforcement of the ancient British contention that the people must be self-governing. It reawoke in the mother-country the conviction of the supreme

worth of this principle and the determination to enforce it. The loss of a portion of the British Empire was followed by a wonderful extension of it in other directions, and with this extension of political power went a gradual extension of democratic self-government to more than four hundred millions of people. The revolutionary spirit that wrought successfully in America spread to France and roused that magnificent though long-suffering people to the consciousness of powers and rights that had smoldered for generations. With the watchwords "Liberty, equality, fraternity" upon their lips the French people pressed on toward the fondly cherished task of bringing all nations to share in their own newly discovered destiny. The outcome was seen in the turmoils that came to a climax in the Napoleonic wars. Though a powerful reaction followed, it was not permanent except in a few quarters. The nineteenth century was pre-eminently revolutionary in politics. There were repeated revolutions in France, culminating in the firm establishment of the republic. Spanish and Portuguese colonies revolted and succeeded in forming independent governments, mostly republican. Revolution in the Italian peninsula issued in a truly national government. A peaceable revolution was accomplished in Britain by the passing of electoral reform bills, emancipation acts, and the repeal of the Corn Laws. Minor revolutions occurred elsewhere. Attempted revolutions in Spain, Poland, Prussia, and Russia mostly failed because of the want of deep popular conviction or because of the supremacy of the military power. Almost with the turn of the twentieth

century the ancient Manchu dynasty was overthrown and a republic was formed in China. And at the very moment of my writing these words there comes the startling news that the Romanoff Czar of Russia has been forced by the popular Duma to abdicate, and that this mysterious country has started on a new career. Other thrones, no doubt, are soon to crumble.

A profound spiritual significance in these changes is further suggested by the intimacy of their connection with the achievements of scientific investigation. Were one to confine his attention to the progress of "natural science" alone, the effect would be sufficient. The man of science, armed with a splendid technique, has been reconquering old realms and conquering realms hitherto unknown. Scientific research has been prolific, not only in discovery, but also in the creation of new problems for the thinker. Consider a single pertinent fact in this connection—the dependence of modern industrialism and modern civil government upon the labors of science. Agriculture, manufacture, building, and transportation look for guidance to the scientific laboratory where, unseen by the great world around him, the explorer of nature's secrets makes his discoveries of the dark continents of reality which others are to exploit for human good. In that same quiet chamber also are being forged implements of government by which the citizens of a nation are enabled to live and move together and the different nations to work out their fearful problems in alliance or opposition. In the present war the issues are as much determined by the man who



holds the weapons of scientific experiment as by the soldier who wields the weapons which these other weapons have made.

When the religious thinker contemplates these recent developments, he is likely to be impressed with the following:

In the first place, these different tides of influence have been synchronous, concurrent, and operative upon the life of about the same peoples. The awakening of the religious consciousness, the commitment to new religious and ecclesiastical enterprise, the uprising of the Christian intelligence, the growing mastery of the secrets of nature and the control and utilization of her forces for man's purposes, the progress of democratic revolution in political and civil life, the weaving of the web of international relations from which no civilized nation can extricate itself—these constitute a great mass movement that seems to operate in obedience to a new consciousness of the meaning of human life and to a new interpretation of its destiny.

In the second place, there is manifest in all this the power of individual personal initiative. Conventional beliefs, social customs, industrial methods, political establishments, have all been challenged by daring reformers and innovators. The experimenter, the speculator, the discoverer, the inventor, and the creator have done new things, and the world has been following, sometimes "afar off," and trying to appropriate the results. No matter how fast society seeks to institutionalize and force the individual's activity into regular

grooves, he breaks away and pushes on still faster. He cannot perish. There never was such another age of individualism as the present.

In the third place, by this very development of the free individual personality, the true universality of man has come to light. The breaking of the old bonds of union among men has led the way to a higher unity. This is attained by the normal unfolding of his powers in their unity and not by the method of artificial restraint. The consciousness of the essential inner unity of all mankind, of the facts and forces of nature, and of man and nature—even though the character of this latter unity may be indefinable as yet—is gradually forcing itself upon the human spirit. Thus by the common progress of men under a guidance, higher, let us believe, than the human, a fundamental principle of the Reformation is finding recognition: namely, life is a unit, the separation of the secular activity of man from the holy is being annulled, heaven and earth are coming together, the world in which we live is our Father's house of "many mansions."

If, therefore, all these various regions of human experience belong to one another and if in their unity they constitute the proper sphere of religion; then, if the Christian faith is to permeate them all with its spirit, if it is destined to become the universal faith, this must be because it reveals the ultimate meaning of them all. A new attempt at an interpretation of its meaning becomes indispensable to the believer.

*[To be concluded]*